

Economic Literacy

by PETER PATSAKOS

CHALLENGE, a magazine published by the Institute of Economic Affairs at New York University, devoted its March issue to "economic literacy in a free society," with reference to corporations, unions, foundations and the government. Contributions were by various university professors and representatives of private and governmental agencies. Present day economists should avoid ivory tower attitudes and be students of society, not merely of economics, we read, since people generally should understand how the economy operates.

Schools, instead of merchandising this or that branch of economics, should teach people to reason independently. These four steps are suggested as an approach: 1, define problem and facts; 2, identify goal or objective; 3, look for feasible ways of attaining objective; 4, analyze consequences of each line of action and choose the most promising one.

"Economics is a social science based on human behavior, with all its motivations, incentives, whims and value systems. 'That was a definition offered by Edwin G. Nourse, former chairman of President Truman's Council of Economic Advisers. Here's another: 'The science and art of economizing or, in everyday language, getting the most for your money.'"

The wide disagreement among faculty members as to the purpose of this science is explained by the fact that "textbooks, like platforms of political parties, try to be all things to all people. They are designed to cover a multitude of purposes, and try to echo the most widely accepted doctrines in a manner that will offend no one." Conservatives and liberals, business

and labor, put forward positions which conflict sharply on free enterprise, private property and the role of government.

One writer believed that "better interpretive reporting in the daily press would be a basic step toward a greater degree of public understanding of economic issues." He suggested that economic journalists be trained much as science writers are, however, until cause and effect relationships are followed regardless of where they may lead, economics will continue to be confused and biased. Statistics, no matter how high their quality, can form only the framework for understanding of economic affairs," said one contributor, "but what bridge exists between the presentation of raw data and its interpretation in terms meaningful to the public?"

Europe seems somehow to have missed this "economic education movement." Professor Benjamin Higgins of the University of Texas attributes this to rigid party discipline in some countries allowing no "need" for economic information. Most European economists are said to be content to give training to an intellectual elite destined for leadership positions, although in many countries there are private organizations which provide more general information. "The Fabian Society and the Henry George Society continue to thrive," he noted.

This scholastic publication confirms the opacity that has often been deplored by Dr. Harry Gunnison Brown, former head of the Economics Department of the University of Missouri, who taught economics for 50 years, wrote an important textbook and many articles, and is currently making his

experience available to the Henry George Foundation in Pennsylvania.

The urgent need for lucidity and simplification of economics is still evident throughout academic texts. Small

wonder that students who were economic majors at college express surprise and pleasure when they discover the logic of Henry George's approach clearly expounded in ten lessons.



The Long Arm of Dr. Plummer

John Gould, writing in *The Christian Science Monitor* of February 27th, recalls a well-known Georgist, Dr. Plummer — referring to him as a "Latter Day Georgic," of Lisbon Falls, Maine. He remembers Dr. Plummer's single pointed emphasis on land value taxation, and seems to imply that something of what he was trying to say has been curiously clarified, but also challenged, in a transaction involving a large grant of unused (worthless?) land from a paper pulp company to the State of Maine for a park on Moosehead Lake.

The Park Department was delighted, and as improvement proceeded the Commissioner found that a few more acres were needed for an access road. The price paid for the few acres was \$75,000. This startled the populace for a time, and put a new value on all the land. According to Dr. Plummer, should the tax assessor now assess all the vast woodland tracts at the same value? The message of the "Georgic" which amused his generation may be less mirthful to the next, as more land speculators invade the woods. The old freedom will be nibbled away by a beaucroatic state and by one penetrating question — what are you doing with your land, farmer?

But for the present, precarious and evanescent though it be, Maine farm-

ers are still laconically cordial to campers in their brief flight from "civilization" and they will continue to enjoy quiet evenings and sweet syrup from their maples — for a while.

Dr. Albert W. Plummer died in 1959 at the age of 90 after 65 years spent in the practice of medicine and support of economic justice. He served in the Maine legislature for three terms and was affectionately known as the "elder statesman" of the Democratic party.

In June, 1958 he demonstrated his spirited interest in *The Henry George News* by offering the following statement of purpose for use on the masthead:

"The earth may be regarded as an estate entailed through successive generations in the use and enjoyment of which all men have equal share and right. . . . To secure to everyone his rightful share in the heritage, government should collect from the holders of the superior parcels the value of such superiority, the ground rent."

We'd like to tell Dr. Plummer that five years after his passing his message was recalled in an important daily newspaper. Many a campaigner for justice has been honored more in death than in life. Truth, like poetry, glows in retrospect.

AN IRISH TOAST

"Health and long life to you / The women of your choice to you: / Children without end to you, / Land without rent to you, / And death in Ireland."